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USING STUDENT RATINGS: INFORMING PRACTICE WITH RESEARCH

After sixty years of research on student ratings of instructional effectiveness, the consensus among investigators is that this valuable source of data is not being properly and effectively used to improve teaching and learning. One major concern is that misunderstandings about ratings lead to a misuse of the information in decisions on promotion and tenure. Because people often lack confidence in student ratings, both good and poor ratings are discounted as reliable indicators of teaching effectiveness. Many researchers have concluded that it is misinformation (some of which borders on mythology) which has greatly contributed to this misuse and mistrust of student ratings for teaching improvement and for decisions on promotion and tenure.

Recent meta-analyses of the evaluation research provide the foundation for confidence in the reliability, validity, and utility of student ratings of instruction. The purpose of this bulletin is to provide some of this information to faculty and administrators who use student ratings for instructional improvement and for personnel decisions. If you have any questions about this information or would like further information, please contact the Learning Development Office at 848-2495.

Some **common misconceptions** about student ratings are:

1. Students are not qualified to make judgements about teaching competence.
2. Student ratings are popularity contests.
3. Students are not able to make accurate judgements until after they have been away from the course for several years.
4. Student ratings are unreliable.
5. Student ratings are invalid.
6. Students rate the instructors on the basis of the grades they receive.
7. Extraneous variables and conditions such as instructor personality or class size affect student ratings.

All of these concerns have been addressed extensively in the research literature resulting in the following **research-based refutations**:

1. Students are qualified to rate important dimensions of teaching such as: course organization, communication skills, and rapport with students.
2. Students do discriminate among dimensions of teaching and do not judge solely on the popularity of instructors.
3. Ratings by current students are highly correlated with those of former students (alumni).
4. Student ratings are reliable in terms of both **agreement** (similarity among students rating a course and the instructor) and **stability** (the extent to which the same student rates the course and the instructor similarly at two different times).
5. Student ratings are valid, as measures against a number of criteria, particularly students' learning.
6. Student ratings are not unduly influenced by the grades students receive or expect to receive.
7. Student ratings are not unduly affected by such external factors as student characteristics, course characteristics, and teacher characteristics. (There is some very recent research evidence that student expectations based on gender may affect student ratings).

Thus, the research evidence is firm in establishing that student ratings are useful as a measure of instructional quality. It is hoped that the knowledge drawn from this research will help to dispel the myths and mistrust and to inform practice.

A short description of several recent publications on student ratings and faculty evaluation and development follows. Each is available at the Learning Development Office.

Braskamp, L.A. & Ory, J.C. (1994). Assessing Faculty Work: Enhancing Individual and Institutional Performance. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

This 333- page text is the most comprehensive and up-to-date analysis of the many facets of faculty assessment and development. The authors present and discuss five major goals of effective faculty assessment namely: addressing both individual and institutional goals; reflecting the complexity of faculty work; fostering faculty members' uniqueness and promoting career development; clearly communicating institutional goals; and promoting faculty collegiality. Throughout this book, Braskamp and Ory emphasize their view that the assessment of faculty work must benefit individual faculty, the institution, and the community.

Braskamp & Ory provide a comprehensive list of the generalizations that can be made from the research on the factors influencing student ratings of the instructor and the course. They also include a "user's manual" which presents a number of different methods for collecting evidence about faculty work.

Cashin, W.E. (1988). IDEA papers 20,21, &22. Centre for Faculty Evaluation and Development, Kansas State University.

IDEA paper No. 20, Student ratings of teaching: A summary of the research, provides a summary of the conclusions of the major reviews of student ratings from 1971 to 1988 along with guidelines for personnel committees and for individual faculty based on this research. Cashin uses the term "ratings" as opposed to "evaluation" in order to distinguish between the people who provide information (sources of data) and the people who interpret it (evaluators). The IDEA system of faculty evaluation and development treats **student learning as the primary measure of instructional effectiveness.**

IDEA paper No. 21, Defining and evaluating college teaching, reviews the various kinds of data that have been used to evaluate university teaching for personnel decisions and teaching improvement. Cashin concludes that the evaluation of teaching has been based on a very incomplete definition of teaching.

Cashin provides an expanded definition of teaching to include: subject matter mastery, curriculum development, course design, delivery of instruction, assessment of instruction, availability to students, and administrative requirements (completed on time). Cashin suggests the following sources for providing data which more comprehensively and accurately evaluate the facets of teaching that he has identified: descriptive self-reports; portfolios or dossiers; student ratings, interviews, comments and letters; peers who are knowledgeable in the subject matter; colleagues familiar with higher education's academic enterprise; chair/dean; administrators; and teaching consultants.

IDEA paper No. 22, Student ratings of teaching: Recommendations, presents thirty-four recommendations, based on the research, for using student ratings. For teaching evaluation at the end of a course, Cashin recommends using short rating forms with global or summary type items such as: **1) Overall, how effective was the instructor? 2) Overall, how worthwhile was the course? 3) Overall, how much did you learn?** For instructional improvement, Cashin recommends a long diagnostic form administered earlier in the term.